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ABSTRACT

While school psychologists are frequently urged to move to a consultation model, little research exists which compares the efficacy of various consultation approaches. This study compared two consultation approaches involving students (N=35) who had attended an intensive 6-week therapeutic residential camp for seriously emotionally handicapped prior to the consultation period. Students were from six different elementary, junior high, and high schools. The consultation programs were intended to reduce the return of behavior disorders during the following school year and consequently prevent more restrictive placements. Consultation was provided in two formats: unstructured, program-centered, and structured, case-centered. Results of the consultation were assessed by the number of students placed in more restrictive placements during the school year, as well as by staff appraisal and attendance at meetings. Staff perceived unstructured, program-centered consultation to be the arena in which they obtained the best ideas. However, student results suggest that unstructured, program-centered consultation is ineffective in maintaining or reducing the restrictiveness of student placements. (Author/ABL)

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Consultation Programs:
A Comparative Evaluation

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Running Head:

Comparative Evaluation of Consultation Programs

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Abstract

While school psychologists are frequently urged to move to a consultation model, little research exists which compares the efficacy of various consultation approaches. This study compared two consultation approaches involving students who had attended an intensive six-week therapeutic residential camp for seriously emotionally handicapped prior to the consultation period. The consultation programs were intended to reduce the return of behavior disorders during the following school year and consequently prevent more restrictive placements. Consultation was provided in two formats: unstructured, program-centered, and structured, case-centered. Results of the consultation were assessed by the number of students placed in more restrictive placements during the school year, staff appraisal, and attendance at meetings. Staff perceived unstructured, program-centered consultation to be the arena in which they obtained the best ideas. However, student results suggest that unstructured, program-centered consultation is ineffective in maintaining or reducing the restrictiveness of student placements.

Consultation Programs:
A Comparative Evaluation

Consultation has been recommended as an appropriate technique by school psychologists for some time (Curtis and Meyers, 1985; Gutkin and Curtis, 1982). Research studies have included outcome research, process research, and practitioner utilization (Gresham and Kendall, 1987). Outcome research has concluded that consultation can effectively change consultee's (teacher) classroom behavior, knowledge, perceptions, attitude, and utilization of consultation services as well as client's (student) classroom behavior and academic achievement. (Curtis and Meyers, 1985; Medway, 1979; Meyers, Parsons, and Martin, 1979; Zins and Ponti, 1990).

There has also been research regarding procedural and personality variables relating to the outcomes of consultation interactions (Greshan and Kendall, 1987). The research suggests that the most important variable in consultation is successful problem definition and the utilization of behavioral approaches (Bergen and Tombari, 1976). Communication skills also affect the effectiveness of consultation (Gutkin, 1986). There has been little research, however, which examines long term effects of consultation or compares consultation approaches.

Consultation has been described in various models including behavioral, mental health, and organization development (Gresham and Kendall, 1976). Models often differentiate consultation that focuses on a particular child from consultation that focuses on a program (Meyers, Parsons, and Martin, 1979). For example, the mental health model differentiates case-centered consultation from program-centered consultation. Proponents of consultation hope that the knowledge gained as a result of case-centered consultation will generalize to the rest of the consultee's cases, and similarly hope that program-centered consultation generalizes to improve the functioning of most individuals within the program (Caplan, 1970).

This study compares two approaches to psychological consultation in public schools: unstructured, program-centered consultation and structured, case-centered consultation. Both of these forms of consultation are also compared with no consultation.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 35 students aged seven through 18 years of age. All had attended an intensive six-week intervention/therapeutic residential summer camp for the seriously emotionally disturbed. Students in the program

attended a total of six different elementary, junior high, and high schools.

Procedure

One group was composed of students for whom no consultation was provided during the school year following their participation in the therapeutic residential summer camp. For the other two groups consultation was provided in two formats during the school year following participation in the camp. Students were assigned to consultation groups dependent upon two factors: the year they attended the therapeutic camp and the school placement the following year.

In unstructured, program-centered consultation the consultants visited the classrooms of the students on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and met with staff on an informal basis. In addition, consultation was provided during staff meetings.

In structured, case-centered consultation, formal meetings were arranged by the school department. Parents, teachers, school psychologists, counselors, pupil personnel team leaders, principals, social service caseworkers, and community based therapists were invited to meetings three times during the year to review each student's progress. Following each meeting, the consultant wrote a report of about two pages which summarized the meeting and made

recommendations. In addition to these formal meetings, the consultants met informally with staff.

The two consultants had been the clients' therapists and/or team leaders during the summer program. Both consultants took part in both formats. The same amount of time (one day per week) was spent in the district by each consultant under both conditions. In both conditions a behavioral consultation model was attempted which concentrated on maintaining behavioral gains in client behavior by developing and implementing intervention plans.

The underlying intent of the consultation program was to maintain the gains made by the students during the intensive summer camp for seriously emotionally disturbed students. Program restrictiveness, that is, the degree to which students were included in regular classes in school, was used as measure of the functioning level of students.

The following questions were posed:

1. What was the average placement initially at the start of the consultation period?

2. What was the next placement made after the consultation occurred?

3. What percentage of students in each condition made placement changes during the course of the school year?

4. How do the forms of consultation compare in whether staff, in their opinion:

- learned a significant amount?
- acquired good ideas?
- made good use of their time?
- would again choose to participate?

Materials

Data relative to student placement was gathered by examination of the student's special education files. Data relative to staff opinions were gathered in interviews, and by response to anonymous questionnaires which posed specific questions and solicited additional comments.

Results

Placement Restrictiveness

The frequency data regarding the students in each type of consultation are presented in Table 1. For all types of consultation there were significantly more males than females, which coincides with the ratio of male:female referral to the camp and diagnosis of seriously emotionally disturbed. There was not a significant difference among the three consultation types and the school placement level (elementary, junior high, and high school) χ^2 (4, N = 35) = 2.3, NS. There was also not a significant difference between the types of consultation and placement restrictiveness (indicated by whether the student

by whether the student was outside regular education programming less than half time, more than half time, in a day-treatment program, or in a residential program) χ^2 (2, N = 35) = .56, NS.

There was, however, a significant difference between type of consultation and whether the students were placed in more restrictive placements following the onset of the consultation. Of the students receiving unstructured, program-centered consultation, 66% were placed in more restrictive settings following the consultation. Only 17% of the students who received structured, case-centered consultation and 7% of the students who received no consultation were placed in more restrictive placements during the course of the year $\chi^2(4, N = 35) = 12.8, p<.05$.

Insert Table 1 about here

These results indicate that unstructured, program-centered consultation did not have the desired effect of maintaining gains and that, instead, 66% of the students in this groups were in more restrictive programs following the consultation than they had been prior to the consultation. In contrast, students for whom consultation was not available, or about whom consultation was structured and case-centered,

maintained their levels of placement. Examination of the frequency data regarding initial and next (after consultation) placements (see Table 2) reveals that although there is not a statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of mean placement, a disproportionate number of the unstructured/program centered consultation group moved into day treatment programs following the consultation.

Insert Table 2 about here

Questionnaire and Interview Results

Questionnaires were returned by 78% of the 18 staff members who had participated in the unstructured, program-centered consultation sessions. Questionnaires were sent to 58 staff members and 14 parents who had been invited to the structured, case-centered consultation sessions. Thirty-nine (54%) of the forms were returned.

Insert Table 3 about here

Questionnaire results, presented in Table 3, appear somewhat paradoxical. While the structured, case-centered meetings were described as "helpful" by staff and were apparently more effective than unstructured, program-

consultation in preventing placements in more restrictive programs, staff expressed resentment at the time involved and suspicion that the meeting benefitted the consultant more than themselves. The unstructured, program-centered consultation was rated as more likely to produce good ideas, yet the respondents did not consider them a good use of time. Respondents in both types of consultation were almost evenly divided in their desire, or lack of desire, to participate in consultation programs again.

Interviews were conducted with staff who attended consultation sessions. The combination of questionnaire and interview results yielded particularly interesting comments relative to the strengths and weaknesses of consultation. Consultation strengths (that pleased staff) included the following:

brainstorming/problem solving sessions
helping develop ideas for interventions
suggestions for better staff interventions
positive feedback regarding previous decisions
discussion of methods for dealing with stress
consultant with substantial "hands on" experience.

Consultation weaknesses (that enraged staff) were:

refusal of consultants to meet with students
meetings that were too lengthy

meetings without a focused agenda
pedantic or superior attitude
passivity and need for direction by consultants
pointless/aimless discussions
lack of follow-up by the consultant
perception of obligation to meet consultant's needs
lack of staff time to meet with the consultant.

Attendance

Attendance of adults at consultation sessions varied among types of consultation. Participation in structured, case-centered consultation sessions was 53%, while participation in unstructured, program-centered unstructured consultation was 64%. Parents attended 36% of the structured, case-centered sessions, an average of one session for each student throughout the year.

Discussion

For school psychologists moving to a consultation model, this study has significance in providing feedback about the relative efficacy of unstructured, program-centered consultation and structured, case-centered consultation. Various implications for effective consultation approaches were evident in responses to questionnaires and interviews, and these results substantiate the findings of previous researchers (Gresham and Kendall, 1987). The approaches

most likely to foster positive working relationships with staff included the following elements:

(1) scheduled, structured, case-centered, behaviorally oriented meetings

(2) meetings held at a time convenient to the staff, and including participants from outside agencies and parents as well as school personnel

(3) meeting with the student briefly prior to meetings

(4) clear agendas and prescribed time limits, the avoidance of non-directed discussions, and the demonstration of respect for school personnel schedules and workload

(5) distribution of summaries of meetings to all participants.

The structured, case-centered consultation approach was equivalent to no consultation in maintaining students' placements. The restrictiveness of placement was not reduced during the consultation period by any approach. This finding, that structured, case-centered consultation was not significantly better than no consultation, contradicts findings of previous researchers regarding the efficacy of consultation (Curtis and Meyers, 1985; Medway, 1979; Zins and Ponti, 1990). This may be because survey results suggest feelings of hostility toward the consultants, which may indicate that interpersonal variables and ineffective communication skills were a factor. Secondly, the structured, case-centered

consultation sessions only took place three times for each student during the course of the school year, which may be sufficient to prevent more restrictive placements but too infrequent to be effective in leading to less restrictive placements.

Unstructured, program-centered consultation was not successful in maintaining students in current programming: to the contrary, a majority of the students were in more restrictive programming following the consultation period than they were at the start of the consultation. There are a number of possible reasons for this finding.

First, students were not randomly assigned to the treatment conditions and it is possible that the students who received unstructured, program-centered consultation differed in a significant way from the other students. This difference may be relevant despite their similar restrictiveness of program at the onset of the consultation, and participation in the same therapeutic program for seriously emotionally disturbed students the summer prior to the consultation.

Secondly, survey results indicated that unstructured, program-centered consultation did not result in concrete problem definition. This step has been found to be essential by previous authors (Bergen and Tombari, 1976).

Third, while for the most part parents did not come to the structured, case-centered meetings, they were aware that they took place. The importance of parental involvement for success in education has been repeatedly documented (Swap, 1987). Perhaps simply being invited to repeated meetings at school enhanced parental involvement in their children's school programs.

It is also possible that inviting outside agency personnel, resulting in "wrap-around" meetings, were a significant factor. While a relatively new concept, "wrap-around" meetings are becoming popular forms of intervention in attempts to minimize restrictiveness of student placements (Behar, MacBeth, & Holland, 1989).

Finally, it is possible that in program-centered consultation the "client" became the program and staff, rather than the student. Thus the consultant may have been inclined to try to meet the perceived needs of the staff and recommend more restrictive placement for disruptive students.

The results of this study must be interpreted with caution, as the sample was small, random assignment was not used, and only two consultants were involved in the study. However, overall results suggest that good communication skills, good interpersonal skills, and concrete problem definition are not simply desirable for a successful

consultation program. Rather, they are necessities. In their absence, more restrictive programming may result. Ineffective consultation may be damaging, worse than no consultation at all.

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Author notes

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Table 1

Total Sample Frequency Data

		consultation type			
		unstructured program-centered	structured case-centered	none	total
N		9	12	14	35
sex	male	7	10	12	29
	female	2	2	2	6
school level:	elem.	4	5	4	13
	jr. hi	4	6	7	17
	sr.hi.	1	1	3	5
mean placement:	intial	26	27	33	29
	next	34	27	37	30
placement change:	increase	6	2	1	9
	decrease	0	1	3	4
	same	3	9	10	22

Placement key

10 = regular class entirely

20 = out of regular class 1 to 15 hours per week

30 = out of regular class 16 to 30 hours per week

40 = private day treatment

50 = residential treatment program

Table 2

Initial/next (after consultation) placements: Frequency Data

	consultation type			
	unstructured program-centered	structured case-centered	none	total
	initial/ next	initial/ next	initial next	initial/ next
(10) regular class entirely	0/0	1/2	0/0	1/2
(20) out of regular class 1 to 15 hours per week	4/2	4/2	2/4	8/8
(30) out of regular class 16 to 30 hours per week	5/2	5/6	8/6	18/14
(40) private day treatment	0/4	2/1	2/2	4/7
(50) residential treatment	0/1	0/1	2/2	2/4
mean placement intial/next	26/34	27/27	33/37	29/30

Table 3

Staff satisfaction: Questionnaire results

		structured	unstructured
How much did you learn at these meetings?			
	very little	21%	33%
	some	27%	8%
	fair amount	40%	17%
	great deal	11%	42%
How much did you think the consultant learned at these meetings?			
	very little	0%	40%
	some	50%	10%
	fair amount	50%	50%
	great deal	31%	0
How often did good ideas come out of the meetings?			
	very little	15%	31%
	some	40%	15%
	fair amount	19%	8%
	great deal	26%	46%
How helpful were the reports?	helpful	48%	NA
	not helpful	35%	NA
	didn't read	10%	NA
	didn't get	6%	NA

Table 3 (continued)

Staff satisfaction: Questionnaire results

	structured	unstructured
Do you feel the meetings were a productive use of your time?		
very little	25%	43%
some	31%	14%
fair amount	28%	21%
great deal	16%	21%
Would you like to participate in the same type of meetings next year?		
no	41%	57%
yes	59%	43%